

Top Tips for Managing Chronic Pain

Understand Chronic Pain

Chronic pain is different from acute pain. Acute pain acts as a warning signal and protects us from injury, but chronic pain has no useful function. Chronic pain is caused by the misfiring of nerves. Nerves send faulty pain messages which you feel as pain even though you're not doing anything that should cause pain. Chronic pain is very real, it's not in your head, but it's caused by faults in your pain system and isn't a warning signal for physical injury like acute pain is.

Pace Yourself

Everyone copes with pain differently. Some people push themselves until their pain is so bad that they have to stop and rest for the remainder of the day. Other people avoid doing things or stop their activities at the first sign of pain to avoid making things worse. Neither extreme is helpful. While rest is helpful for acute pain it can actually make chronic pain worse. In the longer-term, rest makes joints stiffer and muscles weaker, making activity more painful. It's important to pace yourself so you don't burn-out or become completely inactive. Pacing will allow you to be productive and keep pain under control.

Set Goals

For 3 days write down everything you do in a day, for how long, and rate your pain for each activity /10. Do you need to work on increasing your activity? Do you need to take more breaks to avoid burnout? Taking breaks won't reduce your productivity. Breaking before your pain gets worse will actually allow you to be more active because you'll need less recovery time. Set activity goals each day. Make sure your goals are realistic and achievable, even for a bad day. Schedule regular rest periods and take them even if you feel like you can keep going. Over time you'll be able to schedule longer activity periods.

Manage Your Thoughts

Before they reach the brain, pain messages have to pass through the "pain gate" in the brain stem. A number of factors influence which pain messages reach the brain, some of which are controllable. For example, focusing on pain opens the "pain gate" whereas distraction closes it. Your thoughts and expectations also affect your pain.

Keep a thought diary for a week and reflect on whether your thoughts help you manage your pain or make your pain worse. Do you worry about how bad your pain will be the next day and tell yourself you won't be able to cope, or do you take each day as it comes? Do you focus on how bad your pain is or remind yourself that it will eventually pass? Changing your approach to pain is challenging to say the least, but it will help you manage your pain.

CHRONIC PAIN

There are two types of pain: acute pain and chronic pain. They feel the same but they're actually quite different.

Acute pain warns us that we've been injured or are at risk of injury. Chronic pain is different – it's the result of pain signals firing in the nervous system after an injury has healed.

Symptoms of chronic pain are vague and difficult to diagnose, but a diagnosis is usually considered when the pain:

- Has lasted beyond 6 months
- Is the result of an injury that should have healed by now
- Hasn't responded to usual treatments
- Worsens with stress

Living with chronic pain – especially when you can't find a cause – is stressful. It can:

- Affect your ability to work
- Create financial stress
- Put stress on your relationships
- Interfere with your sleep
- Increase risk for anxiety and depression

There is a lot we still don't know about chronic pain, and because of this it isn't yet curable. While there isn't a cure, there are a number of things you can do to make pain more manageable

This tips sheet covers some of the more common pain management strategies. It might also be worthwhile speaking to your GP about a referral to a clinical psychologist or a chronic pain clinic.